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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19, 1812, 6:30 P. M.: THE BIRTH
OF A WORLD POWER¹

Of the short poems of Browning, one of the most inspiriting is that entitled "Echetlos", published in the *Dramatic Idyls* of 1880—a lyric, by the way, with the existence of which, curiously enough, I have rarely found any Browningite acquainted. The first stanza of "Echetlos" I take for the text or legend of the paper I am about to submit. My paper it is true does not relate to the American Marathon, which, presumably, was Bunker Hill; but it does relate to another episode, not less dramatic and momentous, and more germane to the present occasion; for it occurred, startling the whole civilized world, in August 1812, just a century ago. Browning's invocation in "Echetlos" runs as follows:

"Here is a story, shall stir you! Stand up, Greeks dead and gone,
Who breasted, beat Barbarians, stemmed Persia rolling on,
Did the deed and saved the world, for the day was Marathon!"

The papers ordinarily read at the meetings of this Association, generally edifying and often instructive, sometimes even interesting, are rarely calculated to "stir". In this respect, what I am now about to submit will be exceptional. It is hardly less stirring than Browning's description of the

"tiller of the soil, with a clown's limbs broad and bare",
who at Marathon went "ploughing on and on".

"Did the steady phalanx falter? To the rescue, at the need,
The clown was ploughing Persia, clearing Greek earth of weed,
As he routed through the Sakian and rooted up the Mede."

But, poetry aside, coming to my theme, much has of late been said and written of the United States as a "world power"; and four years ago (1908) our associate, Professor Archibald Cary Coolidge, published a most interesting and instructive volume with this as its title as well as thesis—a work of permanent historical value, which at the time attracted unusual attention and led to some controversy. I now go back of Professor Coolidge, and, so to speak, particularize. Indulging in some necessary but none the less interesting detail, I

¹ A paper read at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association held in Boston, December 31, 1912.

propose to specify the exact day of the year and month and week, the hour and almost the minute at which the United States blazed as an indisputable world power on the astonished, and, for some time yet, incredulous nations. To be specific, it was at thirty minutes after six o'clock of the afternoon of Wednesday, August 19, 1812. On that day and at that hour, just twenty weeks over a hundred years ago, this country, I confidently submit, became a nationality to be reckoned with; and such it has ever since been.

When the year 1812 came in, this country of ours, rated as a power of the third class—less considered, for instance, than Portugal, and more nearly on the level of Algiers—had for a score of years been the unresenting football of antagonists as overbearing as they were powerful. Long before, Shakespeare had caused Hamlet to observe:

“ ‘Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell-incensed points
Of mighty opposites ”;

and of this the United States had long afforded mortifying illustration. With Napoleon and the country of Nelson and Wellington locked in a long death-grapple, the young American nation had thought to traffic on their fields of battle. Regardless of buffets and insults, it had done this systematically and as matter of policy. A people, no more than an individual, can pursue such a course in a pure spirit of gain, accepting kicks and cuffs as incident thereto, still preserving its manhood; and it must be admitted as historical truth that between 1801 and 1812 the people of the United States in general, and those of New England more especially, had lost all adequate sense of national pride.

This was during the two administrations of Jefferson and the first administration of Madison. Of that period and of what in it occurred, I personally, and those of my family, always speak under a certain sense of restraint. As Mr. Henry Adams found in writing his *History*, whatever of criticism he might feel compelled to make, however gently advanced, on the incidents and results of Jefferson's foreign policy, was attributed to an hereditary bias: and so dismissed from consideration. More than once such has been the case with me; and whenever I have in the course of inquiry felt forced, as a result of the best consideration I could give to what transpired during the presidential terms of either Thomas Jefferson or Andrew Jackson, to utter any criticism thereon, my remarks have been received with something closely resembling a look of amused understanding, and a perceptible but significant shrug. It was apparently deemed

quite impossible that one of my descent could weigh the incidents and significance of the periods in question in an unprejudiced and judicial spirit. It would doubtless prove so here and now. Without, therefore, myself expressing any conclusion upon the influence on American national character and bearing of the foreign policy pursued by the United States between 1801 and 1812, I shall content myself with quoting on that head the recently uttered judgment of a distinguished naval commander. In a paper read only two months ago before the Massachusetts Historical Society, Rear-Admiral French Ensor Chadwick thus spoke:²

Notwithstanding the evident necessity of at least protecting our merchantmen from seizure by corsairs and the saving of their crews from slavery, a navy was anathema to President Jefferson. In 1802 he proposed in his annual message "to add to our navy yard here [Washington] a dock within which our vessels may be laid up dry and under cover from the sun." In 1807 he could write to Paine, several months after the outrage of the firing by the *Leopard* upon the *Chesapeake*, that a navy was "a ruinous folly." . . . It was, except with reference to the Barbary Powers, an era of base submission to insult; our ships were being seized at the rate, for a long time, of three a day. All this would have been saved; and we should have escaped, too . . . the impressment from their ships of our seamen, at the rate of 1000 a year, the seizure of the ships themselves, and the brutal insult of the *Chesapeake* incident, if we had but followed the advice of Gallatin and Gouverneur Morris and built a fleet of battle-ships. And above all we should have saved our honor and self-respect. . . . I, for one, cannot read the story of the Jefferson and Madison administration without wrath in my heart and contempt in my mind for their so-called statesmanship . . . the twelve years of ignoble policy in the Jeffersonian period toward French spoliation and British arrogance.

Not without a secret consciousness at the time that all this was true, Americans during the period in question were accustomed to read of themselves in the columns of the English press as "spaniel-like in character", a people who "the more they were chastised the more obsequious they became"; and one, moreover, which "could not be kicked into a war". The frigates they had built under previous administrations were rotting at their moorings, being timorously regarded as mere incentives to an increased but ever more contemptuous spirit of foreign arrogance and aggression. They were scornfully referred to in the journals of the mother-country as "bundles of pine boards sailing under a bit of striped bunting". Submitting to it all, the confidence of the people in themselves was gone. They questioned their own man-to-man fighting capacity. By sufferance, they continued to exist.

Recalled through the century vista, the situation in 1812 was,

² *Proceedings of Massachusetts Historical Society*, XLVI. 205-206.

withal, in every respect spectacular. Trafalgar was then seven years passed, and England during the period which followed Trafalgar was fairly drunk with consciousness of maritime power. Britannia did indeed then rule the wave. On the ocean, none questioned her supremacy; for, almost immemorially, hers had been a record of unbroken naval victory—victory on a scale both large and small. During twenty years of incessant conflict, numbering in them more than two hundred ship-to-ship encounters of approximately equal force, the cross of St. George had averaged but one defeat in every forty fights. Contemptuously ignoring all international rules of courtesy or conduct, she had made the United States gulp down the very dregs in the cup of humiliation; for, on June 22, 1807, in sight of the capes of Virginia, the unlucky *Chesapeake*, disgraced and degraded, had been compelled to drag her way, a battered, helpless hulk, back to the port from which she had the day before sailed with officers and crew smarting under a humiliation never either forgotten or forgiven. Unresistingly pounded into abject submission, her company had been mustered on her own deck by a British subaltern, and those whom he saw fit to designate had been taken forcibly from her.

That such an event could have occurred seems now incredible. The mere recollection of it a century later suffices to bring hot blood to the American face. It was as if an individual recalled, not a brutal blow once received but having been contemptuously dismissed with a kick or a cut from a horsewhip. And the curious and most ignominious feature of it, is to recall that at the time, in the places where men met in Boston, party spirit ran so strong and national pride had fallen so low that the outrage was excused and defended as within the right of the British admiral to order and a British captain to execute. An historic fact, such a statement challenges proof.³

The affair of the *Chesapeake* occurred in 1807. It was subsequently settled diplomatically after a fashion, and in a way little conducive to a restored American self-respect; and things then went on from bad to worse. The last dregs in the cup of humiliation remained to be swallowed. We gulped them down. Then, four years later, in 1811, occurred the affair of the frigate *President* and the corvette *Little Belt*. Numerically the armed ships of the United States were to those of Great Britain as one to a hundred; morally, they were as nothing. As was said at the time: "No one act of the little navy of the United States had been at all calculated to gain the respect of the British. First was seen the *Chesapeake* allowing herself to be beaten with impunity by a British ship only nominally superior to her. Then the huge frigate *President* attacks

³ *Proceedings of Massachusetts Historical Society*, XLV. 355.

and fights for nearly three quarters of an hour the British sloop *Little Belt*”, of only eighteen guns, and, it was claimed, had been beaten off by her. It was asserted also that those in command of the *President* had mistaken the sloop *Little Belt* for the frigate *Guerriere*; and because thereof, Captain Dacres of the *Guerriere* and his crew “ felt the full passion and duty of revenge ”. In future there was to be no possibility of mistake; and so the *Guerriere* wore her name writ large on her fore- topsail. She hungered for a meeting with the *President*.⁴

And the day came when the frigate *Constitution* took upon herself the quarrel of her sister ship, and in her turn hungered for a meeting with the *Guerriere*. On August 19, 1812—fifteen months after the affair of the *Little Belt*—that hunger was appeased. The story of what then occurred, and where it occurred, is familiar; but it will bear repetition. Suffice it to say that on the 18th of June preceding war had at last been declared with Great Britain. Then followed an unbroken series of military disasters, culminating, in August, with the disgraceful surrender of Detroit and the destruction of Fort Dearborn, where Chicago now stands. Our entire Northwest was either in possession of the enemy or at his mercy. The cup of American humiliation, already it might have been thought drained, seemed inexhaustible—veritably another widow’s curse. The collapse was complete: and, where open panic did not prevail, utter discouragement was felt. In the midst of it all the *Constitution*, Captain Isaac Hull in command, on July 12 passed out of Chesapeake Bay, and into the midst of a British squadron. She eluded and outfooted them, her escape a marvel of maritime skill and sustained physical endurance; but during a part of that three-day ordeal the *Guerriere* was at the front, and pitted against her; nor did that fact pass unnoticed by watchful eyes on the escaping frigate. They would not then have dared to hope it, but a day of reckoning was at hand. July 26 Hull reached Boston. He then had reason to believe he was about to be called upon to turn his command over to another; but, first, he was in search of a fight. He knew his ship; he had tested his crew; he craved the square issue of battle. So, reporting his arrival, he did not linger, awaiting orders; but on August 2, turned the *Constitution*’s prow seaward. The very next day the anticipated order came. Hull was relieved of his command; but, with that command, he was out of the way, headed for mid-Atlantic, hunting for an opponent. His ship’s company shared his eagerness; from the youngest powder-monkey to the executive

⁴ Henry Adams, *United States*, VI. 36–37, 373; Paullin, *Commodore John Rodgers*, pp. 209–242.

officer they were in the hunt; and when, at last, on the afternoon of Wednesday, August 19, the drums beat to quarters and the grim order came to clear decks for action, it was met with a ringing cheer. This was at 4 P. M. Two hours and a half later the *Guerriere* was rolling in the trough of the summer sea, a battered, sparless, foundering hulk. The next day she sank. She is there in mid-ocean now; not far from the spot where, a century later, the *Titanic* foundered.

The action occurred on Wednesday, the 19th; twelve days later, the morning of Monday, August 31, the Boston papers announced the bitter Detroit humiliation sustained under another Hull two weeks before; but in a different column of the same issue announcement was also made of that naval action which "however small the affair might appear on the general scale of the world's battles, raised the United States in one half hour to the rank of a first-class power in the world". The jealousy of the navy which had until then characterized the more recent national policy vanished forever "in the flash of Hull's first broadside". The victory, moreover, was most dramatic—a naval duel. The adversaries—not only commanders, but ship's companies to a man—had sought each other out for a test of seamanship, discipline, and gunnery—arrogance and the confidence of prestige on the one side, a passionate sense of wrong on the other. They had met in mid-Atlantic—frigate to frigate. On that August afternoon the wind was blowing fresh; a summer sea was running. For about an hour the antagonists manoeuvred for position, the British ship wearing from time to time to fire a broadside; and the American yawning to avoid being raked, and discharging an occasional shot from her bow guns. Finding that nothing was accomplished in this way, Hull wore around, set the main-topgallantsail, and headed directly for his enemy, who bore up with the wind, to meet him at close quarters. Both wanted to have the affair out.

Up to this time the greater part of the American crew had remained stationed at their quarters, impassive spectators; and even while they were running up alongside of the *Guerriere* the gunners stood with locked strings in their hands in silence awaiting the order to fire. To the men, both those handling the sails and those idle at the guns, the situation was trying; for they had been thus brought under a repeated fire without the excitement of striking back. There were of them those who were then killed beside their guns; and his executive officer importuned the American commander to begin the fighting. Hull restrained him; but the order came at last. The *Constitution* had then been worked into the exact position in which her commander wanted to get her. This was a few minutes before

six o'clock; and the historian, writing since, has recorded that now the two opponents "came together side by side, within pistol-shot, the wind almost astern, and running before it they pounded each other with all their strength. As rapidly as the guns could be worked, the *Constitution* poured in broadside after broadside, double-shotted with round and grape,—and, without exaggeration, the echo of those guns startled the world."⁵ Of her first broadside in that action, the master of an American brig, then a captive on board the British frigate, afterward wrote: "About six o'clock . . . I heard a tremendous explosion from the opposing frigate. The effect of her shot seemed to make the *Guerriere* reel, and tremble as though she had received the shock of an earthquake."⁶ That one retained broadside settled the business of the *Guerriere*. "In less than thirty minutes from the time we got alongside of the enemy", Captain Hull afterward reported to the Secretary of the Navy, "she was left without a spar standing, and the hull cut to pieces in such a manner as to make it difficult to keep her above water."

The historian has truly said of that conflict: "Isaac Hull was nephew to the unhappy General [who, three days before the *Constitution* overcame the *Guerriere*, had capitulated at Detroit], and perhaps the shattered hulk of the *Guerriere*, which the nephew left at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean eight hundred miles east of Boston, was worth for the moment the whole province which the uncle had lost, eight hundred miles to the westward. . . . No experience of history ever went to the heart of New England more directly than this victory, so peculiarly its own; but the delight was not confined to New England, and extreme though it seemed it was still not extravagant."⁷

The details of that memorable conflict are in every American history, and there is neither occasion nor time here to recount them. One incident is, however, less well known, and in these days of race feeling and negro burnings at the stake may well be recalled. The African race is, fortunately, not as a rule resentful; but it so chanced that of the four men forcibly taken by the *Leopard* from the *Chesapeake* in June, 1807, two were negroes, and of these one at least had subsequently, by sentence of a court-martial held at Halifax, been flogged well nigh to death. Shipped at Annapolis, the *Constitution* numbered in its crew others of the blood—black men, with woolly hair. Referring afterward to this fact and the conduct of those men, Hull, a rough, seafaring sailor of the period remarked: "I never

⁵ Henry Adams, *United States*, VI. 373.

⁶ Hollis, *The Frigate Constitution*, p. 169.

⁷ Henry Adams, *United States*, VI. 375, 376.

had any better fighters than those niggers,—they stripped to the waist, and fought like devils, sir, seeming to be utterly insensible to danger, and to be possessed with a determination to outfight the white sailors.”⁸ The cry that day was—“Remember the Chesapeake!” and, perhaps, those Maryland negroes, “stripped to the waist”, had it on their lips as well as in their hearts, as they worked the *Constitution’s* guns.

The action had occurred eight hundred miles east of Boston, about south of Cape Race, on the present steamship course to Southampton. Ten days later the anchor of the *Constitution* gripped bottom off Rainsford’s Island, at the entrance to Boston harbor. It was a David returning from combat with another Goliath. Probably in their day the astonished and delighted compatriots of the son of Jesse cheered to the echo their champion. The Bostonians certainly did so now; for, yesterday cowering, to-day they stood with heads erect. A deathly spell was dispelled. They, too, could fight! The 30th of August was the awakening day.

And yet on the morning of that August 30th the *Constitution* had occasion, in the famous figure of speech of George Canning, to “assume the likeness of an animated thing, instinct with life and motion”; to ruffle its swelling plumage; to put forth its beauty and its bravery; and, collecting its scattered elements of strength, to prepare again to “awaken its dormant thunder”. Fatigued beyond endurance by the strain and anxiety of the last fourteen days, believing himself and his ship at last in safety, Captain Isaac Hull had been suddenly roused from a deep sleep by the startling report that an armed squadron was at the harbor’s mouth, and bearing in upon him. Simultaneously weighing anchor and clearing decks for action, he boldly moved out to meet the danger; but, as the *Constitution* approached the leader of the advancing squadron, signals instead of shots were exchanged, and to Hull’s great relief he saluted the broad pennon of Commodore Rodgers, unexpectedly making port from a fruitless cruise.⁹

Not until Tuesday, September 1, did the *Constitution* find her way up above the Castle, as what was subsequently named Fort Independence was still called, to an anchorage in the inner harbor. Captain Hull then landed, and as he made a progress up State Street to the Exchange Coffee House—then Boston’s leading hostelry—the town went wild. Innumerable flags waved, a procession was formed, salutes were exchanged between the shore and the ships of

⁸ Quincy, *Life of Josiah Quincy*, p. 264.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263; Paullin, *Commodore John Rodgers*, p. 257.

war, and the intense feeling found utterance in every form of shouting and tumult. There was, too, sufficing occasion for it all. Its sense of self-respect had suddenly been restored to a people.

One word more and I am done. It relates to a family incident curiously and even pathetically illustrative of the depth of feeling and intense sense of relief which the twice-told tale I have here re-told, excited generally at the time. John Adams, retired from the presidency in 1801, was then passing the closing years of life at Quincy. To no one did the victory of the *Constitution* appeal more directly and for better reason, than to him. Under his guiding impulse the United States Navy—"Continental" it was then called—had thirty-seven years before come into existence.¹⁰ By his hand were drawn up the first rules for its government adopted by the Congress, November 28, 1775. The frigate *Constitution* itself was one of the small armament somewhat derisively referred to in those days as "John Adams's frigates", probably to distinguish them from his successor's armament of coast-defense gunboats. The *Constitution* had taken the water during the administration of the second President, and Isaac Hull's commission bore his signature. In John Adams's family in 1812 was a granddaughter, born in 1808, a little over four years before, and so still an infant.¹¹ More than ninety years later, one serene June afternoon in 1903, it devolved on me to sit by that granddaughter's parting bedside. A woman of four-score and fifteen, the lamp of life was flickering out. As she lay there in Quincy, dying in the house in which she had lived for nearly eighty years, I do not think she was conscious of my presence or of anything going on about her in that chamber of death, for as that day's sun went down she passed away. In those closing hours, however, one memory and only one seemed uppermost in her mind. In extremest old age her thoughts reverted to the first and deepest impression of her early childhood, and, over and over again, in a voice clear and distinct yet tremulous with emotion, she kept repeating these words: "Thank God for Hull's victory!"

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS.

¹⁰ See paper entitled "The American Navy and the Opinions of One of its Founders, John Adams, 1735-1825", by Capt. C. G. Calkins, U. S. N., *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 37, no. 2.

¹¹ Elizabeth Coombs Adams, a daughter of Thomas Boylston Adams, born February 9, 1808, died, June 13, 1903. Further indicative of the intensity of family feeling at the time aroused by the *Constitution-Guerriere* incident, a younger brother of Elizabeth C. Adams, born nine months later, May 26, 1813, was named Isaac Hull. He died at Quincy, October 5, 1910.